

JODI TAYLOR

A PERFECT STORM

'A true page-turner'
SF Revu

A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

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Dramatis Thingummy

~~Director of~~ St Mary's. All-seeing, all-knowing; a bit like the Eye of Sauron but not so benign.

~~Newly appointed~~ Deputy Director. Still all alone.
Superman

~~First Director~~ Bagshaw.

~~Mr. Caldwell~~ and director of Cutter Cavendish Films. A

~~clatter~~ who doesn't quite see the point of history. But he will.

History Department

~~Head of the~~ History Department. Busy. Harassed.

~~Mr. Clerk~~ Bagshaw's father, despite statements to the

~~Earth~~ Vader

~~Miss~~ of the better-behaved historians.

Prentiss/

Captain

America

~~See Arthur~~ on/

General Zod

~~Miss Styles~~ above because she isn't.

Hellboy

~~Mr. Basford~~ religious persecution.

The

Great God

Thor

~~Angitsask~~. Just don't bloody ask.

SECURITY Section

~~Potential~~ Head of Security. Sanctuary for unpleasant

~~Mr. Hoffman~~ According to Nurse Hunter.

The Flash

~~Security~~ guard.

Spiderman

TECHNICAL SECTION

~~Mr. Diche~~ size of a planet and he still can't get through

A simple door.

See above. Obviously a technician thing.

Lindstorm/

Mr Fantastic

WARDROBE DEPARTMENT

Head of Waydrobe. From Welwyn Garden City. Just to be clear. Not Dublin.

MEDICAL SECTION

Blasphemy in all of this.

Nurse in a good mood.

~~Mr Stoker~~. Confused caretaker.

Lex Luther/

Al Capone

R & D

Professor with the megaphone and the pair of

Step 1 **Disasters.** So many disasters waiting to happen.

/ Professor X

Dr. Didisgru/soft landing for the professor.

Dr Doom

Forst is the star of the show.

rocks

Panicking

horses,

roosting

swans

and

aggressive

goldfish.

A Perfect Storm

Prologue



People think the life of an historian is packed full of excitement, danger, romance, glamour and lashings of History. And yes, usually it is, although there's often a great deal more excitement, danger and lashings than a normal person might be comfortable with. But since at St Mary's lack of normality is in our job spec, we generally manage to cope.

And, believe it or not, coming to a spectacularly nasty end somewhere and sometime in the past is not our only function. After all, we are the Institute of Historical Research and part of our job is actually that – research. We assist authors, educational establishments, private citizens, pretty well anyone who writes to us for help, really. We lecture at educational facilities and societies and, occasionally, we advise TV or holo producers on knotty historical problems. We research the historical facts for whatever epic they're planning, bundle it all up and send it off to them so they can ignore it. Mrs Enderby provides the details of the costumes to be worn and sometimes the Wardrobe Department is asked to make them as well. She's been nominated for several awards and we're very proud of her, *and* it brings in a modest but much needed income because, according to Dr Bairstow, you could fund a small city for a year on what it takes to keep St Mary's up and running for an afternoon. At this moment, we generally nod sympathetically and edge towards the door.

Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that we, the Institute of Historical Research at St Mary's Priory, to give us our correct title, do

other things besides endangering ourselves getting to grips with History. Sometimes, we can endanger ourselves by remaining quietly at home.

Take last week, for example ... not only did we not have any current assignments, we hadn't been up and running properly for some time. A very nasty explosion in Hawking had taken out the hangar and most of the pods inside it. Markham, Guthrie and Leon had been badly injured. And then a rock fell on me in Constantinople – hey, these things happen.

So, given that everything had been very quiet for a very long time while we regrouped and rebuilt, you'd think that the opportunities for anything catastrophic to occur would be few.

Wouldn't you?

MONDAY



Every day begins with tea. That's a given. Leon and I take it in turns and that particular Monday morning, it was Leon's. I lay still and listened to him hobbling slowly around our rooms, getting things ready. It takes him ages these days, but he insists on carrying on as normal and I wasn't going to argue. Well, not very much. I always kept my eyes closed and pretended I couldn't hear him making his very slow and painful way across the room. He was recovering, but it was a long process. He was due back at Time Police HQ in a few days for yet another course of treatment, and I would be back to work next week, so we were making the most of these last few days together.

We always took our time and drank our tea in bed. I insisted on it. Not for any sloppy, sentimental reasons, you understand; mostly to give Leon a face-saving moment to rest before heaving himself to his feet to embark on his shower, shit and shave routine. Sometimes, on his less good mornings, it nearly broke my heart, but he wouldn't accept any help, so I just had to grit my teeth and let him get on with it, cheering him on with word and gesture and by comparing his top speed unfavourably to that of continental drift.

We always walked downstairs to breakfast together as well. Very slowly. We do have a heavy goods lift which is used to get the big stuff up and down the building – it had once had an illegal mammoth in it, but it's probably best for everyone if we don't mention that. Leon wouldn't use it even without the smell. Lifts are for wimps, apparently. Real men use stairs.

We split up in the dining room. He said, 'See you later,' and limped off to the techies' table, and I joined Peterson and Markham. We'd got into the habit of eating together a year or so ago when we'd done something naughty and I'd been suspended and no one else wanted to

have anything to do with us. I'd been reinstated, but as Markham pointed out, for some strange reason still no one seemed to want to have anything to do with us. Peterson and I would shake our heads in bafflement.

Peterson surveyed our civilian clothes. 'Am I the only one in uniform these days?'

Markham and I carefully inspected him and then each other. 'Looks like it,' he said cheerfully.

Leon wasn't the only one struggling with severe injuries. Markham had been hurt in the same incident and Major Guthrie was still upstairs in Sick Bay. They let him out for an hour every now and then, and he was improving, but he would never be Head of Security again. That honour would fall to Markham on his own return to duty.

'I'm due my final check-up next week,' he said, care-fully building himself the world's biggest bacon buttie. 'So, I'm sending in Max this morning to soften them up. Anyone who's had to deal with her will welcome me with open arms.'

'Why are you worrying?' I said. 'With your super-powers, surely Nurse Hunter will pass you fit for duty.'

'He's never been fit for duty,' said Peterson scathing-ly. 'Even before he crash landed on Constantinople.'

Markham ignored him and, having now constructed an edifice similar in size and shape to the Leaning Tower of Pisa, was attempting to get some portion of it into his mouth.

We watched in silence and then left him to get on with it. There are some things even an historian won't get involved in.

'So, you have a busy day ahead of you today, Max.'

I did. I had my final medical to blag my way through, followed by an interview with Dr Bairstow. 'I have to say, it'll be good to get back into my blues.'

'If you pass your medical.'

I waved a piece of toast in a manner that conveyed my complete confidence that I would sail through it rather in the manner of the good ship *Revenge* taking on the Spanish in 1591. Actually, she was 'outgunned, outfought and outnumbered fifty-three to one', but you get the point.

Beside me, by the sound of it, Markham's buttie was getting the better of him.

'It's a bit like watching one of those giant pythons eat a goat,' complained Peterson. 'And then the goat wins.'

Markham made a complicated noise indicating he needed to keep his strength up, chewing valiantly until he could say to Peterson, 'You still on for this evening?'

'What's happening this evening?' I asked.

He'd taken another bite by then so it was left to Peterson to say, 'Pub crawl.'

Ah yes, I'd forgotten. To mark our return to normal working – or as close as we could ever get to normal working – St Mary's was embarking on a traditional pub crawl and tonight was the night. Markham, cheeks bulging like an overworked hamster, beamed at me and tried to speak.

'I'm sorry,' I said, getting up. 'Watching him could put my recovery back months. I'm off. See you later, guys.'

I trotted down the long corridor, just because I could, and took the stairs two at a time, just because I could – and also because I thought it would give me a healthy colour when I arrived – and presented myself in Sick Bay at exactly one minute to nine.

They shoved me into the scanner, peered at various read-outs, muttered to each other and then Dr Stone turned up, looking younger than ever. I have a theory he's aging backwards. I'm going to bounce in there one day to be confronted by a foetus with a stethoscope.

'Any pain?' he asked cheerfully.

'Only when I do this.'

He stared at me. 'Well, don't do it then.'

I nodded obediently. He ticked a box, tore off a slip, handed it to me, and pronounced me fit for duty.

Yay!

Next thing on today's list of Things to Do was Dr Bairstow. He wouldn't take kindly to me wandering around in unnecessary civilian clothing, so I changed into my blues, smoothing the material fondly because it had been a while, rammed in a couple of extra hairpins for good luck, and shot off to see him.

His desk was ominously empty. It's never cluttered because he doesn't work like that, but there's usually a file or two on it somewhere so that he can fiddle with them before unleashing his next verbal thunderbolt. On the positive side, though, things had been so quiet recently that I really didn't see how this could shape up to be quite the blood-chilling, conscience-examining precursor to disaster it usually was.

I got that wrong.

'Two things this morning, Dr Maxwell,' he said. 'Neither good. Do you have any particular preference as to which disaster should fall upon you first?'

'None, sir,' I said cheerfully. I was a recovering invalid. He wasn't going to give me hard time.

I got that wrong as well.

'Very well. We shall begin with this.' He opened a drawer and laid a manuscript on his desk.

This particular manuscript did not come as any surprise to me. I had a copy on my own desk.

I pulled out the specs I now have to wear, thanks to the cunning deviousness – deviosity? – of our new doctor and plonked them on my nose. They were, as usual, covered in greasy fingerprints and, as usual, I thought how much better I could see before the intervention of the medical profession. I'd chosen horn rims because, as I'd said to Peterson, they made me look both intelligent and sexy. He'd patted me on the shoulder and told me he'd always admired my capacity for self-deception, and I was so happy to see this flash of the old Tim Peterson that I'd let it go.

To look at him now you would think he was perfectly normal, but a little while ago he'd lost Helen Foster – my great friend and the love of his life. I wondered if he was dealing with this in the same way he had dealt with the wound to his arm – keeping it all inside and confiding in no one. I wondered if Dr Bairstow was aware, because strictly speaking, now that he was Deputy Director, Peterson was his responsibility. He must be, surely – Dr Bairstow is a great deal cleverer than I am. (Don't tell him I said that because he would only respond by saying there are single-celled amoebas and coffee tables who are a great deal cleverer than I am.)

Anyway, I shoved on my specs and picked up the manuscript. The title page read *The Time of My Life* by David Sands.

There were many bookmarks sticking out from the pages. I'm a godless heathen – I turn down the corners. Dr Bairstow obviously walks in a state of grace because his corners remained unturned.

'Like stones,' I said chattily.

'I beg your pardon?' he said frostily.

'No stone unturned, sir.'

'What stone?'

There's always a point when I must make the decision whether to continue winding him up in what is always a vain attempt to distract him from the matter in hand, or to jump straight in.

'So how can I help you this morning, sir?'

'You've seen this?'

'I have indeed, sir. It's very good, don't you think? Our Mr Sands is making quite a name for himself these days.'

'Did nothing particular strike you about his book?'

'Well, it's very different from anything he's done before, sir.'

David Sands wrote thrillers. Very good ones. I had them on my own shelves. And I believe Dr Dowson had purchased a dozen or so copies to put in the library. Rumours that Miss Lee had stood over him while he placed the order were, apparently, completely founded.

'He seems now to have moved from that genre and into the realms

of science fiction and written a story concerning...' he paused, gathered all his resources, and enunciated distastefully, '...time travel.'

'Well, people do, sir. It's a very popular genre.'

'Have you read it?'

'Yes indeed. He sent me a copy.'

'Were you struck by the many similarities to St Mary's?'

'Not really, sir. His protagonists appear to be a bunch of highly-trained and well-organised scientists who travel up and down the timeline by means of some sort of time-travelling device they wear on their wrists, having all sorts of exciting adventures along the way. It's all very high-tech and efficient. They never end up in the wrong place. No one is ever set on fire. No one is arrested for stealing a loaf of bread. No one ever catches dysentery and no one has inappropriate sex with anyone else. Really, sir, I couldn't see any similarities to St Mary's at all.'

'The organisation is called St Christopher's.'

'Well, that just goes to reinforce my point, sir. St Christopher is the patron saint of travellers. A very natural choice.'

'If this book is published there will be copies of it everywhere.'

'Including top of the bestsellers list, sir.'

'Questions will be asked.'

'What sort of questions?' I said, getting in one of my own.

'Such as how could I allow this to be published?'

'How could you stop it, sir? He doesn't work for St Mary's any longer.'

David Sands had resigned some time ago, along with Gareth Roberts, a small and noticeably beardless Welshman. We – the History Department – had got ourselves into not a little trouble and they'd both stormed out. I'd been present at the time and knew for a fact there had been no question of getting either of them to sign any non-disclosure agreements.

We regarded each other across the vast expanse of his immaculate desk.

He turned to the title page. '*The Time of My Life* by David Sands. With grateful thanks to Dr Gareth Roberts of the University of Ceredigion for technical advice.'

I beamed. 'Oh, that's nice, sir. Gareth's got his doctorate.'

'That was not the point I was trying to make.'

'Sorry, sir.' I waited for the point. Sometimes our interviews are rather like the Battle of Kadesh, when the Egyptians took on the Hittites – no clear winner but each side claims victory afterwards. I put my forces on standby and prepared to repel boarders.

He unleashed his front rank. 'I do not believe I can allow this to be

published.'

I brought up my archers. 'With respect, sir, I'm not sure you can prevent it.'

He flattened them into the dust. 'One telephone call should be sufficient.'

The remains of my forces fled. Cowardly scum. 'But why?'

'I believe it would be in the best interests of St Mary's. I have nothing against Mr Sands or his work. Indeed, I have enjoyed his books greatly, but this hits too close to home, Max.'

He marshalled his forces for the victory parade and handed me the manuscript. 'It might be easier and gentler coming from you.' And razed my capital city to the ground. Great. Thanks very much Dr Bairstow.

I took it reluctantly. This really wasn't in my remit. 'But sir...'

Too late. He was moving on to the second unpleasant item on the agenda.

He passed a file across the desk

My heart sank. They say your chickens always come home to roost. Well, this one certainly had. As I've already said, some time ago, I'd got us all into serious trouble and, as part of my punishment, the Boss had set me to fundraising for St Mary's. I'd seeded the entire country with leaflets, adverts, podcasts, Facebook pages, you name it, all advertising St Mary's and the services we could offer. And, astonishingly, not only had one of those seeds germinated, it had gone on to bear fruit. I strongly doubted, however, that I was the best person to harvest the ... the ... oh, sod it – strangled by my own analogy.

'Mr Calvin Cutter,' he pronounced.

'Who?'

'Calvin Cutter, the producer.'

Oh. Him. Calvin Cutter is the co-founder and one of the directors of a film company. They make those romantic, historical dramas that are usually shown on Sunday afternoons as an alternative to the football. You know the ones. They always start with a hand turning the pages of a book explaining the plot. Always a signal it's time to get up and clean the toilet.

'Ah,' I said, fully intending to pass this on to whoever in the History Department had annoyed me most recently, but that plan was nipped in the bud because, as Dr Bairstow unreasonably pointed out, it had been my publicity campaign that had started the ball rolling in the first place.

I was determined not to give in without a fight.

'But sir...'

'You will accord him every courtesy, Dr Maxwell. Show him

everything he wants to see and accommodate his slightest wish. You may wish to lock Professor Rapson in the basement where he can do no harm. You will impress Mr Cutter to such an extent that he signs a contract employing us not only to do all the historical research for his next three films, but to design and supply the costumes as well. Do I make myself clear?’

‘But sir, they put horns on their Viking helmets.’

‘Then it will be your responsibility to ensure that that heinous offence is never committed again.’

‘And blades on Boudicca’s chariot wheels.’

‘May I refer you to my previous statement?’

‘And that musical they did on Hildegard of Bingen, when she wandered around with a cleavage bigger than the Valley of the Kings...’

‘Why are you still here, Dr Maxwell?’

I sighed and sagged. ‘When does he arrive?’

‘Thursday. Show him around. Give him lunch. Impress him. Get that contract signed. See to it, Dr Maxwell.’

I’m an historian. Rising to the challenge is what I do. I assembled my motley crew – or the History Department as I try to insist they’re called – and harangued, bullied, persuaded, entreated, pleaded, commanded and made shameful use of my recent injuries to get what I wanted. In the end, nearly everyone signed up, mostly, they said, so I would stop talking and go away.

Dr Dowson offered to show Mr Cutter around the Library, which was an excellent idea because it would separate him from Professor Rapson who, together with his volatile section, would be confined to R&D for the duration. Dr Bairstow had made it very clear that nothing – and I stress this, Dr Maxwell – *nothing* was to prevent Mr Cutter being so impressed with the quality of research done at St Mary’s that he would beg us to sign as many contracts as we liked. Sometimes I think he imposes slightly unreasonable demands upon his unit, but never let it be said St Mary’s is unequal to the task before us.

Peterson offered to set up an archery demonstration and there was a short silence as everyone tried not to remember he couldn’t pull a bow properly any longer. However, I smiled and thanked him and he nodded.

‘Side-saddle,’ said Prentiss. ‘Sykes and I need the hours, anyway. We’ll blag a couple of riding habits from Wardrobe and show off.’

‘Both of those are good suggestions. Mrs Enderby, can you provide a display of our best and most beautiful costumes. Along the gallery, I think. Angle it so that it keeps him away from R&D.’

She nodded her complete understanding.

‘Historians, clear the Hall of anything we don’t want anyone to see. Lay out some of the Troy, Carthage and Hastings material – flashy stuff that will give him a good impression of our work. Anything else?’

‘Is he going to be wandering around the building?’ asked Sykes. ‘What about the repairs in Hawking?’

‘Everything locked up. Blast doors down. Absolutely no admittance. Civilian clothes to be worn that day. No pressure, but anyone screwing up will be fed, live, to Dr Bairstow. Any questions?’

They shook their heads and wandered off.

The Great St Mary’s All Repairs Completed At Last Pub Crawl has passed into legend. And not a good legend. None of the participants could remember much about it afterwards – I swear, it was easier to piece together the fall of Troy than get a clear idea of what happened that night – but mostly it was memorable because it was the night Bashford met Angus.

Everyone assembled in the Great Hall. For some reason, they had all decided to dress as superheroes. With much posturing and cape swirling, they set off down the drive to meet the minibus that was to take them into town. It was also supposed to bring them back again although that didn’t go quite according to plan. I must say thirteen superheroes assembled together are quite an impressive sight. They’d taken a lot of time and trouble with their costumes and I think it’s only right that I should list them here:

- Peterson – Superman. Not quite as muscular as the original, but making a good try as he led his happy band of heroes to their night of adventure.
- Markham – The Flash. Small, scarred and overpoweringly red. Like an acne-ridden teenager.
- Dieter – The Hulk. A part he was born to play. It had taken two people the best part of the day to paint him green.
- Bashford – The Great God Thor complete with giant silver hammer, and currently hiding from Mrs Mack who was demanding to know who had stolen her entire supply of kitchen foil.
- Atherton – General Zod. Mr Normal. I was relying on him to keep everyone in line. I don’t know why I bothered.
- Clerk – Darth Vader. He’d been practising The Voice all week, and now he made a stunning entrance, Darth Vader music blaring, and informed a startled Dr Bairstow that *he* was his father. He was bundled away before he could shorten his life expectancy even further.

- Mr Strong – Lex Luthor. Wearing a brown and white pinstriped suit and carrying a violin case. It turned out later he'd confused Mr Luthor with Mr Capone.
- Lindstrom – Mr Fantastic. Complete with nine-foot-long elastic arms over which he regularly tripped. I had no idea how they were going to get all of him on the bus and looked forward to seeing them try.
- Miss Prentiss – Captain America. She'd stolen a dustbin lid for her shield and painted it with the old-style Stars and Stripes.
- Miss Sykes – Hellboy. Enough said.
- Evans – Spiderman. He had equipped himself with one of those party spray things to enable him to squirt his web over everyone, but it was confiscated by the minibus driver and he forgot to ask for it back.
- Professor Rapson – Professor X because it was easy for him to remember.
- Dr Dowson – Dr Doom. Ditto.
- Miss North had refused to participate, much to everyone's relief, and I was staying behind with Leon. We were having a quiet night in.

Anyway, we waved them off from the front steps because, as Leon said, we might never see some, any, or all of them, again. No one seemed particularly dismayed by this prospect.

That was Monday. Things soon got worse.

Tuesday

(The Early Hours)



Their return was nowhere near as epic as their departure.

No one is very clear how it happened but, at some point in the evening, they had all become separated. I'm not sure how you can lose a group of colourfully clad superheroes but they'd managed it, no problem at all.

First to come to grief was the Great God Thor who, displaying the usual historian sense of direction, had somehow got himself lost and was wandering out of Rushford towards Ireland – and ultimately America – when he encountered what turned out to be his lifelong companion, Angus. When questioned afterwards, both appeared equally confused as to the details of their meeting, but it turned out to be a happy accident for the pair of them because, only five minutes later, they encountered a group of lively and slightly inebriated young men who happened to have a number of issues with Thor and his new friend. Things would have gone badly for the Great God had he been alone but, fortunately, Angus slipped naturally into the role of trusty sidekick, standing over the Great God when he tripped over his hammer, and pluckily defending him against all comers. Having seen off their attackers, they happily turned their footsteps in the direction they believed St Mary's to lie, although by now, the evening's exertions had become a little too much for Angus, who had to be carried home. Mr Bashford's injuries were severe enough to need monitoring for forty-eight hours in Sick Bay, in case of concussion, although how they'd be able to tell was a bit of a mystery.

It didn't get any better. Mr Fantastic and his elastic arms were delivered to St Mary's in a police car. No charges were brought, but he was instructed to write a letter of apology to a Miss McLelland,

who had never before met a superhero with nine-foot-long appendages and had had to be taken into Tesco's and given a glass of water.

Markham won the 'Who can come home with the most traffic cones?' competition. He always does. Seven at the first count, equalling the current record (already held by him), which soared to eight after I had the forethought to nip in and remove the one sitting in solitary splendour on Dr Bairstow's desk with the rude verse attached. The one which began 'There was a Director of St Mary's...'

Wherever they'd been and whatever they'd been up to, General Zod, Darth Vader and Lex Luthor didn't pitch up until after breakfast the next morning with no clear memory of the night before, although they thought there might have been a badger.

Professor X and Dr Doom mistakenly boarded an overnight delivery van believing it to be the local bus home. On being discovered some miles away and escorted to the train station, they'd been unable to remember the word for Rushford and boarded a train to Redruth instead. They spent the next day zig-zagging around the country, eventually arriving, dishevelled but cheerful, around tea-time.

Our revered Deputy Director, just in case anyone was wondering, was brought home in a disgraceful condition by Captain America, Hellboy and The Hulk, themselves not much better. They experienced some difficulty getting through the front door since the four of them had linked arms – for stability, presumably – and they spent a considerable amount of time bouncing gently off the door frame and staggering backwards before coordinating themselves enough to mount another attempt. A small crowd gathered to watch them making complete arses of themselves. I believe a great deal of money was won and lost on whether they would ever gain entrance and it was very possible they might be there still if Mrs Partridge – of all people – had not sighed in exasperation and arranged them in single file instead of horizontally, after which, to loud cheers, they successfully navigated the Scylla and Charybdis of the front doors. She gently guided them into the Great Hall, where, good deed done, she abandoned them to find their own way to their beds. Dieter wandered off to talk to his pods. Peterson, apparently on automatic pilot, successfully found his way to his room. Hellboy was subsequently discovered washed, pyjama'd and serenely slumbering in her own bed. No one had any idea how that had happened. Spiderman, left to his own devices, fell asleep on the bottom stair. It seemed kindest to leave him there so we did.

Dr Bairstow, passing that way some ten minutes later and very carefully ignoring the latest thing in draught excluders, commented to no one in particular that his unit appeared to be disintegrating

around him and limped on his way. His temper was not improved by finding his beloved car in the middle of the Great Hall the next morning.

I remember staring at it with Markham swaying gently beside me.

‘How the hell did you get it in here?’

‘To be honest, I can’t remember.’

‘What do you remember?’

He peered at me. ‘Who are you?’

For some people, Tuesday was a very gentle day. Everyone used their indoor voices.

Thursday



We spent most of Wednesday preparing for Mr Calvin Cutter. I chivvied Peterson and Markham mercilessly, even though they both looked like death in trousers, and then on Thursday, just as things seemed to be settling down again, Mr Calvin Cutter arrived.

I disliked him on sight.

I don't know why, but I was expecting someone tall and artistic, who would toss his silky blond hair and utter, '*Darling...*' with every other sentence.

Calvin Cutter was below average height, flabby around the middle and had one of those mobile headset things attached to one ear. I don't know why he didn't have it implanted subcutaneously because he was never off it.

I met him in the Boss's office. He was talking on his phone. Dr Bairstow stood nearby, rigid with outrage at this discourtesy.

'Ah, Dr Maxwell,' he said, ruthlessly cutting across the chattering Mr Cutter. 'May I introduce Mr Calvin Cutter, co-owner of Cutter Cavendish Films.'

'How do you do,' I said, also ignoring his phone conversation, and holding out my hand. It would be interesting to see how many conversations he could hold at the same time.

He stared at it vaguely, still talking to someone apparently named Justin. I seized his unresisting paw and shook it vigorously.

'Welcome to St Mary's.'

'What?' he said, breaking off his phone conversation.

'Excellent.' I beamed. 'I'm glad that difficult point has been covered. I must admit, we didn't expect you to agree so easily.'

'What?'

Dr Bairstow was regarding me with rare approval. I made a mental note to request a pay rise before it evaporated.

'Shall we begin,' I said, moving towards the door.

‘Wait,’ he said, startled. ‘No, not you, Justin. Just a minute, Dr Umm...’

‘I thought we could start with Wardrobe,’ I said, gesturing ahead of me and setting off at a good speed. I really wasn’t bothered whether he was with me or not. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d been discovered roaming the corridors of St Mary’s having long a conversation with myself.

Mrs Enderby had done us proud. A History of Costume through the Ages was ranged around three sides of the gallery, not coincidentally blocking the door in and out of R&D.

‘We’ll start at Saxon and early Norman, Mr Cutter. Please note the similarities in style. Moving on now to the early Middle Ages. You can see how, over time, the surcoat has evolved and...’

He wasn’t listening, staring over my shoulder, and yapping away for dear life. I suspected Justin was being difficult. I waited until he had finished, beamed at him again, and said, ‘Well, that’s very generous of you. Don’t think we don’t appreciate your kind offer.’

‘What...?’

‘You must let me introduce you to Mrs Enderby, who has charge of all matters pertaining to costume and wardrobe. I believe you are familiar with her work. I think Dr Bairstow has already forwarded you a list of productions in which St Mary’s has collaborated. Her designs for *The She-Wolf of France* were nominated for an award.’

‘Shut up, Justin, I’m trying to concentrate here. Just wait a minute, will you?’

Of course, he could try just switching the damn thing off.

‘She’s just through here,’ I said, ushering him into Wardrobe, a hive of chattering activity, and where their latest creation, a 17th-century court dress stood in eye-catching pride of place.

I couldn’t see her initially, but it seemed safe to assume the pair of legs poking out from underneath the huge skirt was hers. Which, of course, meant that while her nether regions were on show, her top half couldn’t be seen. Or see.

She was talking. ‘And don’t talk to me about Cutter Cavendish Productions. Their last picture was a disgrace. Well, not commercially, of course, but they had servant girls in costumes that laced up the back. And their leading man kept wearing those stupid flimsy shirts with the big sleeves. And all those heaving bosoms. They call him Tits and Bums, you know, because he doesn’t care about any sort of historical accuracy so long as everyone’s bosom is falling out of their bodice and the men’s breeches are so tight that if you look hard enough you can see every – well, never mind. The man’s an idiot, anyway.’

I really thought I’d covered all my bases. Professor Rapson, if not

behind locked doors, was as good as. Sykes was on a horse somewhere far, far away. Bashford – who might or might not be concussed – was in Sick Bay. Miss Lingoss was ... I didn't know where Miss Lingoss was, but she wasn't here, which was the main thing. And Markham was off in the cupboard the Security Section persist in referring to as their nerve centre and well out of harm's way. I never, ever thought it would be Mrs Enderby, of all people.

I cleared my throat.

There was a kind of frozen silence and the already voluminous skirt bulged even further and then grew still. Very, very slowly, two legs were drawn up inside the fabric.

I'm an historian. I can deal with a crisis. God knows I've had enough practice.

I said brightly, 'Has anyone seen Mrs Enderby this morning?'

Heads shook and her loyal staff assured us, with complete sincerity, that no one had seen Mrs Enderby that morning. So convincing were they that if I hadn't just seen her taking up residence beneath a 17th-century court dress I would have believed them myself. Someone shyly suggested she might be in Admin, checking over invoices. Someone else suggested she was out on the gallery ensuring our display was perfect. They were incredibly convincing. I resolved never again to believe a word this section uttered. Ever.

'Ah, never mind, we'll catch her later then. Come along, Mr Cutter.'

Back out in the corridor, he peered out of a window.

'What are those big white things out there?'

I peered cautiously because, quite honestly, it could have been anything. 'Oh no, it's all right, Mr Cutter, it's a swan. Several swans in fact.'

'In a tree?'

'Um...' I wasn't sure what to say. As far as I know, our swans are unique in that they're more often to be found a good thirty feet up a beech tree, rather than swimming serenely across the lake looking picturesque.

'Dear God,' he said, giving his ear a good belt again. I'd have been happy to do it for him. 'Justin, book me a call to the BBC Wildlife Unit in Bristol.'

I had an idea we weren't going to be featuring on Justin's Christmas card list this year.

Mr Cutter turned to me. 'How long have they been doing that?'

'They've always done it,' I said, striving to present at least an appearance of casual normality and slight surprise that other people's swans don't do the same.

'This place is totally weird,' he said. 'Where to next?'

I led him slowly along the corridor, taking care to go the long way

around, and bless me, if there wasn't Mrs Enderby miraculously ahead of us, breathlessly tweaking the folds of an Elizabethan noble's doublet.

'Ah, there you are,' I said, rather brilliantly I thought. 'They said you might be here. Can I introduce Mr Cutter from Cutter Cavendish films?'

Mrs Enderby, seemingly determined to distance herself from their unfortunate initial encounter, smiled widely and in the world's worst Irish brogue said, 'A pleasure to meet you, Mr Cutter. I do so admire your work. Of course, I was a little astonished to see that, in your adaptation of *Emma*, none of the ladies wore headgear. I know such a lapse was widely discussed afterwards in the trade, and we all agreed there must have been overwhelming production reasons for such an oversight.' Adding belatedly, 'To be sure.'

I think it was around about now that I had an inkling of just how badly things were going to go that day.

He stared at her for a moment. She held out her hand. 'Enderby. Mavis Enderby. From Dublin.'

She was from Welwyn Garden City.

He shook her hand. 'How do you do. These are all ... very pretty.'

The temperature plummeted. He had passed beyond the Pale.

Mrs Enderby is small, round, and endlessly kind. She also fought in the civil uprisings along with Peterson's PA, Mrs Shaw, and our Kitchen Supremo, Mrs Mack. Mrs Mack commanded the famous Battersea Barricades, and these days was as famous for her raspberry crumble as she was feared for the battle ladle she kept under the counter.

I think I remembered Mrs Shaw telling me that Mrs Enderby had worked in logistics while she herself had been in code breaking. To hear the two of them speak about that time, you'd think they just made the tea and did the filing, but I knew for a fact they'd been with the rebel forces in Gloucester when the Fascists poured out of Cardiff and across the Severn. They'd been overrun in Westgate Street and fallen back to College Green. With the cathedral at their backs and nowhere to go, they'd made their final stand and prevailed. Three weeks later, after the famous victory at the Battersea Barricades, it had all been over. The three of them had fought together again at the less famous Battle of St Mary's and had pretty much brought the building down. A compassionate and caring guide would probably take Mr Cutter aside and point out that many of our civilian staff were, in fact, weapons of mass destruction. Yeah, I really should do that. For his own good.

I stared at my feet and wondered what to have for lunch.

She said frigidly, 'You are too kind,' entirely forgetting the brogue,

and stepped back, staring glassily over his shoulder.

A rather sticky silence descended. Even Mr Cutter seemed to realise he'd gone wrong somewhere or other and, while he was endeavouring to bring himself back up to speed, a fat brown chicken walked past, paused to peck at a bit of carpet and then continued on its way down the gallery.

Mr Cutter turned to me. 'Was that...'

'Was that what?' I said helpfully.

He pointed. 'There's a bloody chicken over there. Not ten feet away.'

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the chicken was on the move again. At the end of the gallery landing it paused briefly, presumably getting its bearings, and then turned right towards Admin – I didn't much fancy its chances in there – and disappeared from view.

We turned around and ostentatiously looked up and down the gallery.

'No,' said Mrs Enderby with simple sincerity, 'I can't see a chicken anywhere. Can you, Max?'

'No,' I said in tones of concern. 'Can I get you a glass of water, Mr Cutter?'

'It's gone now.'

'Of course it has,' soothed Mrs Enderby.

I winked at her and we led him slowly down the line of costumes. To be fair, apart from glancing back over his shoulder a couple of times, he did make an effort. He admired the Tudor and Stuart stuff – and so he should because the costumes were superb. Optimistically, I began to think we might possibly overcome our unfortunate beginning.

We paused outside the door to R&D, currently being guarded by a model of a Scottish Highlander, complete with blood-stained claymore and a dying Redcoat at his feet.

He peered around the tableau. 'What's in there?'

I'm famous for my brilliant ideas. Although brilliant is not a word often used to describe them. But some of them have been stonkers and I had one now.

'Records,' I said, smoothly, 'Going back to the year dot and hugely fascinating. Let me show you...'

His nose twitched. He had instincts. Or hay fever.

'No, I don't think so. What, Justin?'

I took advantage of his distraction to beckon to Miss Lee, invariably present at any potential disaster and whispered, 'Release Professor Rapson from wherever he's been stored for safekeeping. Tell him he has my permission to set up the Hannibal Barca

experiment. He has two hours and he'd better make it good.'

Her eyes sparkled. 'Can we have war elephants?'

'If you can find a dozen war elephants in the next thirty minutes then yes,' I said, knowing full well it takes a decade of paperwork. Minimum.

'Gotcha,' she said, and disappeared. Time to get our guest out of the building.

I piloted him outside, hoping he might be interested in something a little less girlie and a little more action related, but it was the same story for Peterson's archery demonstration and Prentiss and Sykes's rather good side-saddle show. Yes, he watched them, but he talked all the way through. I told myself he was in the entertainment industry. They were supposed to be able to multi-task. Just because he wasn't looking or listening, there was no reason to suppose he wasn't taking it all in somehow. By osmosis, perhaps.

If he was taking it in – osmotically or otherwise – we had no clue as to his opinions. He strode briskly back into the building where we showed him carefully selected examples from some of our more spectacular assignments. Mr Clerk filled him in on the Troy stuff. Mr Cutter was disappointingly Helen-oriented. The whole thing was about her after all, he said. Why didn't she get a mention? Which of the film industry's leading ladies did we think she most resembled?

He described a dramatic scene – just off the top of his head, of course – in which, heavily disguised in Paris's battle armour, Helen stole away to the Greek camp at the dead of night to intercede with Agamemnon on the Trojans' behalf, and then slept with Odysseus to seal the deal. Naturally, she would encounter great perils all along the way, including, oh, who was that woman with the snakes – Medusa, yes, that was her, and that hydra thing and possibly the minotaur, all of whom she would despatch with ease. My own opinion was that with those sort of skills, the Trojans could just have sent her out into the field by herself and themselves stayed at home drinking tea. We listened politely because Dr Bairstow insists on good manners and then, thank God, it was time for lunch – something to which, for once, I was not looking forward. Our Mr Calvin Cutter was rather heavy going.

Mrs Mack had set aside a quiet table for us. I was just pulling out a chair when a small miracle occurred and Peterson said, 'Mind if we join you, Max?' and he and a grinning Markham sat down with us. I gave silent thanks to the god of historians.

I wondered if the best way to keep Cutter off the phone was to get him to talk about himself. The same idea had obviously occurred to Peterson who, with an expression of great interest, requested Mr Cutter to tell us about his current productions.

‘Well,’ he said, shovelling his food down with no appreciation whatsoever, ‘just now we’re looking for something a little different.’

‘Really? What sort of different?’

‘I’m not sure yet, but I’ll know it when I see it.’

He cut us off to talk to his ear again. I refused to catch Peterson’s eye and concentrated on my food until Mr Cutter deigned to rejoin us.

‘So tell me, Dr Maxwell...’ so he had picked up my name, ‘what are you researching at the moment?’

I tried to choose topics that would interest him. ‘Well, we’ve just finished with Hastings, as you’ve just seen. Before that, we looked at the coronation of King George IV, examined the possibility that King John lost the crown jewels in The Wash, and attempted an in-depth survey of an early version of Stonehenge. Over the years, we’ve studied the battles of Agincourt and Thermopylae. And some time ago, we took a close look at Mary Stuart, her marriage to the Earl of Bothwell, and the circumstances leading up to it.’

He stabbed at a chip. ‘Why?’

‘Well, there was some doubt as to the accuracy of...’

‘No, I mean why do you waste your time with all this dead stuff?’

Well, that was rather rude. Peterson and Markham put down their forks – a St Mary’s manifestation of outright shock. I was made of sterner stuff, but he must have guessed we weren’t that impressed because he smiled a surprisingly charming smile.

‘I’m sorry. That came out all wrong. What I meant to say is that this stuff is dead and buried. It’s finished – done with. And yet, there are all these people here, ferreting away to uncover tiny bits of information which simply aren’t relevant any longer. I mean, look at you all. Most of you are young – comparatively,’ he said, looking at me and not making any friends at all as far as I was concerned. ‘I’m not going to say, “Why don’t you all get proper jobs?” but I’m certainly thinking it.’

I opened my mouth to reply but there was no chance. It was like trying to hold back the Red Sea after Moses had been messing around with it.

‘I mean, it’s OK if you’re applying this knowledge to something relevant or important, like making a holo or a TV programme maybe, but you’re all so up your own – I mean the amount of effort you put into tiny details is quite disproportionate to the results. Who cares if Emma Woodhouse wore something on her head or not? Who cares if we show the Greek cavalry with stirrups? How important is all that, really? In the scheme of things?’

I didn’t hit him with my Spotted Dick but I came close. I do think, however, something of what I was feeling might have got through to

him.

‘I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.’ He smiled again. He really did have quite a nice smile. ‘I know what you think of me and I enjoyed your efforts when I was talking on my phone. I’m sorry – that was rude of me. Having three conversations at once is standard behaviour in my world, but I forget it’s not like that here. I mean, this place is so sedate. And serious. Sober. Solid. Settled.’

Apparently, he was determined to empty the English language of words beginning with S. He ended with a big finish. ‘Staid.’

At this moment, Miss Lee materialised at my elbow. For once, I was pleased to see her. It was about time she used her powers for good.

‘Professor Rapson presents his compliments, ma’am. The fires have been lit. We have vinegar, sour wine, cola and water.’

Peterson looked thoughtful for a moment then caught my eye. I had a twinge of doubt. He was management, after all.

He took advantage of Mr Cutter conversing with his ear again, to say quietly, ‘Do I know about this – whatever it is?’

‘No, plausible deniability. You are DD after all.’

Markham grinned. ‘Is that his bra size?’

Peterson regarded him coldly. ‘And your role this afternoon?’

‘None of this is anything to do with the Security Section,’ he said, spooning up the last of his custard. ‘We’re just going to sit back and watch. See you later.’

Peterson watched him go, turned back to me, glanced at the still chattering Cutter, and winked. Another flash of the old Tim. I grinned back again.

Lunch finished, I took Mr Cutter outside for our St Mary’s extravaganza. Someone had set up benches and tables and chairs. I chose a table in the warm sunshine which should have an excellent view of unfolding events. Acting on previous instructions, Mrs Mack brought tea. It was interesting to watch the way it was delivered. Peterson got a warm smile because everyone likes Peterson. I was the recipient of a slightly smaller smile because on the one hand I’m a known troublemaker but, on the other, my ability to pack away gargantuan amounts of her chocolate-orange cheesecake meets with her approval. Mr Cutter received a ferocious scowl, but I guessed her failure to behead him with the tea strainer meant she too had been warned not to damage him before contract signing had occurred.

Barely had we made ourselves comfortable when we were disconcertingly joined by Dr Bairstow, who mildly enquired what was happening.

‘Fire setting, sir.’

He said nothing very eloquently.

‘I know what you’re thinking, sir, but it’s a perfectly legitimate experiment. The professor gave the statutory three-days warning last month.’

This three-day warning period had been stipulated by Dr Bairstow himself after the Clock Tower Trauma some years ago, so he had no cause for complaint there. And besides, if things went well – and the law of averages decrees that surely, one day they must – something this spectacular could just tip things in our favour.

And yes, all right, before anyone says, ‘Fire setting? Professor Rapson? Are you out of your mind? What did you think would happen?’ I have two very reasonable excuses. Firstly, this experiment had been on the books for quite some time and, secondly, it really is quite legitimate.

We all know Hannibal crossed the Alps with his war elephants. Obviously, they encountered a hefty rock or two obstructing their path. For those that didn’t respond to the traditional pick and shovel, the ancients used fire setting. It’s quite simple. You set fire to the rock. I know they’re not usually that flammable, but Professor Rapson could ignite a bucket of water, so no difficulties there.

Anyway, having set fire to your rock and got it good and hot, two things could happen. Either the rock fell apart all by itself due to the heat, or – and this is the good bit – you adopted the Hannibal Barca method of rock disposal and tossed vinegar on it and watched it shatter. Apparently, he carved his way across the Alps that way. Pliny bangs on about it somewhere if you want to read up on it. It’s very efficient and I believe people used variations of this method until comparatively modern times. Especially down the mines. The main drawback is the production of what everyone refers to as ‘foetid vapours’ but because, here at St Mary’s, Health and Safety is paramount at all times, we were doing it outdoors. Where absolutely nothing could possibly go wrong.

And yes, you’re right. I wanted to shake Mr Cutter out of his anti-history complacency with something spectacular. To put things in perspective, I had, at one point, considered a spot of jousting – spectacular *and* exciting – but that’s only fun and games up until the moment when someone loses an eye – as the French king Henry II discovered to his cost in 1559 and look at all the trouble that caused. I bet fire setting doesn’t look so bad now, does it?

Anyway, to add a modern twist to things, not only was the professor using historically accurate vinegar, but we were also having a go with sour wine –available by the amphora in ancient times – water, or melted snow as it would have been then, and cola. Everyone knows the effect cola has on pennies, teeth and stomach linings – but now we were using it for a practical purpose. If it

performed as well as vinegar, then maybe they could add fire setting to their advertising campaign. It could be the real thing.

We have some rather pleasant rock gardens at St Mary's. They were laid out about two hundred years ago, when landscape gardening was all the rage. There are a couple of quiet pools where big, orange goldfish swim serenely from one end to the other. We don't have any problems with herons: Bashford swears he once saw one dragged under by a couple of determined koi.

Obviously, we weren't going to have a go at anything in the rock garden because it was almost certainly the horticultural equivalent of a listed building. Happily, whichever 18th-century garden designer had ordered most of the rock in the county of Westmoreland to be delivered here had got his quantities wrong, and we had four enormous if superfluous slabs of Westmoreland stone stationed at one end of the car park. No one knows why. They'd sat there for donkey's years. Although if the professor got things right and things went well today – not for very much longer. So, as I pointed out to Dr Bairstow, this experiment had a practical value as well.

They'd obviously had their fires going for some time. A smouldering framework, stuffed full of burning wood, encased each rock. A massive heat haze hung over the whole area. We were a good way back and I could feel the heat from here.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Dr Bairstow looking around with an expression of mild anxiety. I didn't blame him. The experiment was taking place next to the car park. We're not idiots, however. The car park had been emptied immediately I'd given the go ahead and, as a further precaution, Dr Bairstow's beloved Bentley – which traditionally does not fare well during this sort of thing – was parked a good half mile away in the village. In the Falconburg Arms car park to be precise.

The horses had been removed to a safe distance away in the second paddock. Over the years, they'd displayed enormous reluctance to become involved in anything Professor Rapson related, and at the first sign of anything unusual happening they tended to be off and away, and we would be collecting them from all around Rushfordshire for days afterwards. For some reason, the police always seem to know they're ours. And, as usual, the swans were roosting some thirty feet off the ground, so I was confident we'd covered everything.

Dr Bairstow sighed, hung his stick off the arm of his chair and, taking advantage of another Cutter dialogue with his ear, said quietly, 'Please reassure me that there will be absolutely no risk to Mr Cutter. I don't think either of you quite appreciate the difficulties involved in persuading a dead person to sign a contract. Quite apart

from the practical issues, which are complex and wide-ranging, such documents are extraordinarily difficult to uphold in a court of law. You will, therefore, oblige me by not killing Mr Cutter until the ink is well and truly dry.

Peterson and I nodded solemnly. 'Understood, sir.'

Surprisingly, he seemed satisfied by this and turned his attention to me. 'In your haste to leave my office this morning, Dr Maxwell, you forgot this.'

He handed me the manuscript I'd deliberately left lying on his desk. Damn and blast!

'Thank you, sir.'

'I thought you might be concerned you had lost it,' he said, settling back comfortably.

What can you say?

Several St Mary's personnel, all dressed as brutalised slave labour – i.e. wearing their normal St Mary's gear – were rushing around with their arms full of wood, stoking the fires. Smoke, flames and crackling sparks curled into the air. The heat was extraordinary and the addition of any sort of liquid seemed superfluous. Surely the flames alone would be sufficient to shatter the stone.

Apart from all that, the day was lovely. A warm sun shone in a clear blue sky. Mr Stone, obviously under the same starter's orders as the rest of us, had ensured the grounds looked immaculate. If it wasn't for the St Mary's personnel, the scene would be idyllic.

Given recent events I was quite happy just to sit in the sunshine and watch other people work, but I had forgotten the short attention span of the entertainment industry.

'So,' said Calvin Cutter, apparently not addressing his ear this time, 'this is rather slow. What's supposed to be happening here?'

'Well,' said Peterson leaning forwards and, remembering his audience, kept the explanation short, sharp and spectacular, using sugar cubes and milk to demonstrate.

Dr Bairstow gazed on in benign approval.

Peterson paused.

Mr Cutter did not. 'And?'

'And then we shall see what we shall see.'

Calvin Cutter looked at us. 'Don't you know what will happen?'

'Nope,' said Peterson happily.

Dr Bairstow coughed gently. 'We tend to find that the element of uncertainty only adds to the excitement of the proceedings,' which came as a complete surprise to Peterson and me who had, on many occasions, been given to understand – quite strongly sometimes – that the element of uncertainty did not feature prominently on his happy list.

‘So, you’ve no idea how this will turn out?’

‘None at all. Would you like some tea?’

‘No,’ he said shortly, which I thought was rather rude even for a member of the entertainment industry.

Dr Bairstow stood.

‘Are you leaving us, sir?’ I said, trying not to sound too relieved.

‘Alas,’ he said, ‘Although I have not yet had the opportunity to explore the more remote areas of my in-tray, I am certain that whatever is lurking there will be less explosive than remaining here. Please bear in mind my earlier comments on the difficulties of implementing contracts of dubious provenance, Dr Maxwell.’

‘Of course, sir,’ I said gravely.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Cutter. I’m sure I shall be seeing you later this afternoon. Probably.’

He limped away.

We sat some more.

‘This is rather slow,’ said Mr Cutter again, shifting impatiently. ‘At this rate, it would have been quicker for them just to have waited for glacial erosion, don’t you think?’

Beside me, Peterson twitched. I suspected he was desperate to get stuck in with the rest of the History Department, but as Markham had pointed out, he was DD now. Rank doth not always have its privileges. I, on the other hand, older than I would like to be both in years and experience, was staying well out of it. There was every possibility there would be tears before bedtime and I was determined none of them would be mine.

Clutching a megaphone, Professor Rapson began to mount an ancient pair of stepladders which swayed somewhat precariously.

‘Andrew, you old fool, come down at once,’ shouted Dr Dowson – albeit from a safe distance. He had dressed for every meteorological contingency imaginable in bright yellow wet-weather gear, green wellies, trousers tied below the knee with string, a hard hat surmounted by a sou’wester, and he was carrying a Roman shield in one hand and a gas mask in the other.

I looked up at the cloudless sky and shook my head. It was probably best not to ask.

With an eldritch shriek, the professor activated his megaphone.

‘STAND BACK, OCCY. I’M NOT QUITE SURE HOW THIS IS GOING TO TURN OUT.’

Thirty people reeled backwards clutching their ears.

‘SORRY ... sorry,’ he said, adjusting the volume. ‘Can you hear me now, Occy?’

‘Of course, I can hear you, Andrew. They can hear you in Madagascar. And I am already standing well back. Do you take me

for a complete idiot?’ Wisely not pausing for a reply, he hastened on. ‘And come down from that ridiculous contraption. I fail to see how you will be able to assimilate the results of this preposterous episode accurately if you’ve broken your neck.’

‘No need for concern, Occy,’ boomed Professor Rapson, startling birds from the trees for a radius of two miles. Except the swans, of course. ‘I have everything completely under control.’

That he wasn’t instantly blasted from his perch only goes to show how very much not up to the job the god of historians is.

The megaphone gave another appalling screech.

‘Remember everyone – you are Carthaginian troops on your way to attack Rome. You will also be at risk from avalanches, unpredictable war elephants and possibly the local tribespeople as well. Try to factor that in.’

A small group of people standing nearby obediently lay on the ground – avalanche victims presumably. Several more ran screaming from the scene – ‘Exit pursued by an elephant,’ murmured Peterson. Sykes, meanwhile, was dealing with imaginary local tribespeople by shaking her fist and shouting, ‘Shoo. Shoo. Go home you naughty tribespeople and trouble us no more.’

I resolved to have a word with her later.

‘Last loads everyone,’ boomed the professor as the final armfuls were dumped on the fires. The flames roared even higher. People retired to a safe distance. That’s a St Mary’s safe distance, obviously, not some girlie safe distance dreamed up by the HSE to drain all the excitement out of life.

‘We shall dowse all the rocks simultaneously,’ the professor continued, ‘so we can ensure they’ve all received the same amount of heat for the same amount of time. Dowers – stand ready.’

Four people stepped up, suited and booted in fireproof suits. Well what did you think? We’re not complete idiots, you know. A plastic dustbin full of murky-looking fluids and a stirrup pump stood close to each, by now almost incandescent, rock.

‘On my mark,’ boomed the professor.

‘What’s going on?’ said Mr Cutter, cutting Justin off in mid-flow. ‘Is this it at last?’

Everyone stood very still. The only sounds were the crackling flames and the occasional snap of burning wood.

‘Mark.’

Each figure immediately began to pump like a madman and a small river of miscellaneous fluids simultaneously engulfed each rock.

Which, as Peterson said later, might have been a bit of a mistake.

In my ignorance, I thought the rocks would just crack. I thought that Hannibal’s men would chuck a gallon or so of vinegar at the

obstructive hot rock, then give it a bit of a poke with a sharp implement, that the rock would fall apart, and then everyone would continue on their merry way to bring down Rome. What do I know?

Many, many things happened all at once.

Four vast plumes of steam boiled and hissed into the air to a considerable height, merging into one colossal mushroom shape of doom. The smell was appalling, catching at the back of my throat and making my eyes stream. With a massive crack that hurt my ears, all four rocks exploded simultaneously.

Something zipped past my ear. And then something else clattered onto the table. Something else thudded to the ground beside my chair.

‘Everyone down,’ yelled Peterson.

He grabbed Calvin Cutter and dragged him down under the table.

I’m an historian. I was already there.

‘What was that?’ said a somewhat muffled voice. We rolled him onto his back so he could breathe.

‘Shrapnel,’ said Peterson shortly, and it was.

Great lumps of flaming rock were flying everywhere. I heard shattering glass somewhere in the distance.

‘What the hell...?’ said Mr Cutter, trying to get up. We pulled him back down again.

The fumes were appalling. I could feel my eyes running and the back of my throat felt raw. It hurt to swallow. We rolled Mr Cutter back onto his face again so he could inhale dirt rather than foetid vapours.

‘We should get him out of here,’ I said, becoming aware of a nasty headache beginning to throb above my eyes.

I peered around. Some people were running away – some had done as we had and taken refuge under the tables as rocks and burning wood rained down upon us. I swear my ears were still ringing.

‘It’s like the K-T extinction event,’ said Peterson.

‘The what?’ said Cutter, coming up for what he mistakenly thought was fresh air.

‘You know – the end of the dinosaurs. We could be looking at a nuclear winter by tea-time and extinction by lunchtime tomorrow.’

I should be so lucky. If anything happened to Calvin Cutter, as far as Dr Bairstow was concerned, extinction would be the least of my problems.

There was another clatter of stones on the table top over our head and we all huddled back down together. Suddenly, Dr Dowson’s bizarre get-up made a great deal of sense.

Speaking of whom ... I rolled over. ‘Professor, are you all right?’

His voice came from not too far away. ‘Yes, yes, Max, I’m perfectly

all right. Thank you for asking.'

'Should it have done that?'

'Not really. I think perhaps the rocks may have been defective. I must say, Max, this sort of thing does make you doubt Pliny. I mean, I don't know a lot about elephants but I'm sure they would have found this sort of thing most upsetting. I find it hard to believe they wouldn't have turned tail and fled, don't you?'

'What is he talking about?' demanded Calvin Cutter.

'I feel sick,' said someone nearby.

Yes, we needed to get out of here. I needed to get everyone evacuated back inside St Mary's. Which would make a change. It's usually the other way around. The smell was terrible. We were going to have the Parish Council around again.

Everything was still enveloped in steam.

In the distance, I could hear hoofbeats as the horses galloped past on their way to safety. Asia presumably.

'There go the dinosaurs,' announced Peterson, whom I began to suspect was not taking this seriously at all. 'It'll be the mammals next. I'd keep my head down if I were you, Mr Cutter.'

Cutter, the silly ass, had somehow acquired David Sands' manuscript and was using it to protect his head as he peered over the table top trying to see what was going on. Peterson yanked him back to safety, but undeterred, he produced a small palm device and began bashing away at it, generating his own heat haze of excitement.

'Justin, Justin, you won't believe what's happening to me. How do you spell ricochet? ... What? ... You'll have to speak up – I'm under some sort of bombardment here ... Yes, you heard me. I tell you Justin, these people are bat-crap crazy.'

I was about to refute this statement – and with some indignation, too – when all the security alarms went off. The formerly peaceful sunny afternoon was rent again with klaxons and bells. I closed my eyes, but it didn't help.

And here came the cavalry, headed by Markham himself, pre-empting Dr Stone's permission to return to work. For all his talk of none of this being anything to do with them, the entire Security Section was already toggled out in fire-fighting gear. Some had extinguishers, others those flat paddles with which they attempted to beat out the flaming grass.

A small group of them broke away to try to round up the horses before they caused chaos – well, further chaos – by escaping to the village. Or trying to get into the main building. Or in the case of the big, dirty brown beast known as Turk, chasing, catching and eating Markham, against whom he had a long-standing grudge.

Peterson grinned at me. 'So much more enjoyable when I know

none of this is my fault.'

I shot him a reproachful glance. Water off a duck's back.

My com bleeped and Rosie Lee said, 'You still alive out there?'

I was touched that she would ask and said so.

'I was concerned something had happened to you,' she said. 'because you haven't yet signed my timesheet this week. And I wanted to tell you a bloody great meteorite just came through the window and landed in your in-tray.'

'Good job I wasn't working at my desk.'

'You're never working at your desk.'

I ignored that. 'Is there much damage?'

'The entire top layer is toast.'

'Really? Because right at the very bottom there's a request for pod stats over the last two years. Could that be toast too?'

'I'm under my desk at the moment, trying to find something in my bottom drawer.'

'What could be more important than this, for God's sake?'

'Clean underwear.'

'You're not wearing clean underwear?'

'Not any longer.'

'Listen – lose the pod stats and I'll do my best on behalf of your beloved's manuscript.'

'Max! Bad news! The pod stats have just gone up in flames! All two years' worth!'

That's my girl.

I was impressed our Mr Cutter hadn't run a mile. Now, however, Peterson finally allowed him to emerge from under the table.

We waved our arms to dispel the foetid vapours. For all the good it did. Professor Rapson trotted over, a scarf tied around his nose and mouth. 'Everything all right here, Max?'

'Yes,' I said, turning slowly to get the full effect. It looked as if a small war had occurred. The whole area was covered in pieces of rock, burning wood and overturned furniture. Some areas of grass were still on fire. A pall of evil-smelling smoke hung over everything.

Peterson was surveying the remains of the ex-rocks. 'They certainly went up with a bang, Professor. Was that intentional?'

Professor Rapson pulled me aside and whispered, 'Actually, Max, for your ears only, I might have cheated a little.'

'What?'

'Well, Miss Lee said you said I had to make it good, so I added a little something extra.'

'Don't tell me,' I said quickly. 'And Dr Peterson doesn't need to know at all.'

He nodded. 'Understood.'

I just had time to give thanks that however half-arsed a job the god of historians had done today, at least Dr Bairstow hadn't been around to witness it, when my com beeped and Dr Bairstow's voice said, 'My office, Dr Maxwell, at your earliest convenience, please, when I look forward to hearing your explanation as to why the History Department has just tried to kill us all.'

'Shit,' said Peterson – management's invariable response to a crisis. Second only to looking around for someone else to blame, of course.

It dawned on me that Calvin Cutter had been quiet for a very long time which might have been because when I looked round, he wasn't there. I panicked. Surely he hadn't incurred some injury. Nothing that would render him unable or unfit to sign a contract anyway. It would be just my luck if he croaked before signing something vital to our future financial stability.

And, my other responsibility – David Sands' manuscript – what had become of that? I sighed. This wasn't turning out to be one of my better days. And then things got even worse, because Calvin Cutter had retired back under the table and was gazing at the manuscript, apparently lost to everything going on around him.

He sat, silent and still, staring at something probably only film producers could see. I was concerned he might be having some sort of neural event, although there was always the possibility this was a perfectly normal state for those in the entertainment industry. I told myself it might be some form of sleep-sitting to which he and his colleagues might be prone, and that waking him could cause more problems than it solved. At least he'd stopped talking, which, as far as I was concerned, was a huge improvement on before. Peterson and I stood quietly as St Mary's whirled past us in the traditional aftermath of one of the professor's forays into Practical History and waited for events to unfold.

And unfold they did.

Returning to the real world, Mr Cutter thumped his ear again. 'Justin, give me Marj ... What do you mean in labour? Labour is something you do – not go into ... What? No never mind. I'll do it myself.'

He addressed himself to his ear again. 'Call Marj ... Marj? Where are you?... Why don't I know you're not in the office today? ... What? But you had it last week ... Yes, you did. I distinctly remember giving you time off to go to the hospital ... Well, how many check-ups does one foetus need? You should nip this sort of thing in the bud, you know. This constant attention-seeking does not bode well for the future ... Anyway, enough of that. I need you to draw up contracts for ... What? ... What? Who are you? ... No, you're not her

sister. She doesn't have a sister. I had her vetted very carefully for potentially demanding family members and close personal relationships. The word sociopath is not the stigma people think ... What sort of sister? ... Oh ... Well, now I come to think of it, how did she manage to get herself pregnant in the first place? Put her on ... Put her back on ... Marj, as soon as you can – this afternoon will be fine if you're busy now, I want you to draft ... I don't understand. Why can't you? ... Well, how long do you think it will take? ... Why don't you know? Are you even married? ... Three years? You never mentioned it ... No, you didn't. Who are you married to? ... Never heard of him ... What *our* SAS? Well, yes, obviously, I've heard of *them*. They're in all those films about storming embassies and ... Hello ... Hello ... Who the hell are you? ... Oh ... Right ... OK ... Sorry ... Yes ... There's no need for ... Yes ... Right ... Sorry.'

He tapped his ear and turned to us. Peterson and I were looking everywhere but at each other.

'He seemed a bit unstable for former SAS, but maybe I'm not the only one who can't get the staff these days.' He paused to readjust his ideas. 'Justin, send flowers to St Brenda's Nursing Home in Bath. Lots of flowers. And chocolates. And one of those gift voucher things so they can get a pram or something. Or nappies. Send lots of nappies. And those cute suit things that babies wear ... I don't know. Do people still do pink for boys and blue for girls? ... Are you sure? Well, send both to be on the safe side. It'll be one or the other. And fruit. I've read somewhere that women need a lot of fruit after childbirth. Send a fruit basket every day. And a card. Give it to Chelsea – she can forge my signature better than I can. Have it all delivered today. And stick in a note asking her what she's done with the script for *Fanny Price – The True Story*. And where are the budget figures for the thing on Bonnie Prince Charlie? And about the contracts, of course.'

'Do you think we could keep him?' murmured Peterson. 'He's rather good value, don't you think?'

We bundled him upstairs to Dr Bairstow's office, which was, mercifully, foetid-vapour free, and finally got him sat down. Mrs Partridge placed a cup of tea in front of him which he ignored. I saw her lips tighten and hastened to thank her because you really don't want to get on the wrong side of Mrs Partridge.

I don't think he stopped talking the whole time. I'd never seen him so excited. It was a miracle his ear didn't drop off.

'Hello. Justin. Yes. Write this down. An historical society. Dull as ditch water on the surface. But hiding a secret. They're secret time travellers – changing history for the better. Bringing back the dinosaurs. Which escape and terrorise ... oh I don't know, how about

Edinburgh? We could have them rampaging down Princes Street and destroying the castle. They help Boadicea when she defends London from Julius Caesar. They save Elizabeth I from the Great Fire of London.'

'No,' I said, feebly.

'Freeing the princes in the Tower when Richard III tries to murder them.'

'He probably didn't,' I said, even more feebly.

'There'll be a handsome hero.'

Peterson preened. On what grounds remained unclear.

'And a beautiful heroine – stacked, of course.'

Someone made some sort of noise, but when I stared at them suspiciously, Peterson was staring at his feet and Dr Bairstow was gazing serenely out of the window.

'She keeps having to be rescued, of course. From Pharaoh's harems. From being burned at the stake. You know the sort of thing. She falls in love with a Viking and brings him back to the modern day. Could he have superpowers? We could start with the *Mayflower* and the brave pilgrims fleeing religious persecution.'

'They didn't,' I said feebly. 'They emigrated because England wasn't strict enough for their...'

He wasn't listening. 'Well, I don't know – a tunnel, maybe. Or a time rift. They're always popular. Especially in Cardiff. Or,' he said, rifling through David Sands' by now quite bedraggled manuscript, 'some sort of time-travelling amulet they discover when raiding a secret South American ziggurat. Like in that film with that woman who pouts a lot. That could happen. We'll sort something out. Talk to you later.'

I tried again. 'But...'

The Boss waved me into silence. 'An exciting idea, Mr Cutter. I think you have a winner there. You can rely on St Marys' to provide you with everything you need.' He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle and two glasses. 'Shall we sit down and thrash out the details?' He ran an experienced eye over two of his most senior members of staff. 'Dr Peterson, Dr Maxwell, please do not let us detain you.'

We exited slowly and with great dignity – as befitted two senior officers in a top-secret government establishment. Through Mrs Partridge's office and around the gallery. We descended the stairs wearing our best responsibility-laden expressions, worked our way through the boiling mass of historians in the Hall, out through the front doors and down the steps into the very nearly fresh air. And then – and only then – were we able to let go at last.

It took some time. Peterson's a giggler and every time I thought I'd

got myself back under control he'd catch my eye and off we'd go again. Until finally...

'Haven't done that in a long time,' he said, straightening up and wiping his eyes.

'No.'

'You all right now?'

'I think so. Yes.'

'So,' he said, smoothing down his hair and striking a noble pose.

'Who do you think they'll get to play me?'

I took a deep breath. 'Lassie, probably,' and stamped off to suss out the damage.

Yeah, Thursday was quite exciting.

Friday, however, was aftermath day.

Friday



The next morning, straight after breakfast, Leon and I called in to Sick Bay. Leon had another medical appointment and I wanted to see how Mr Bashford was doing, still bruised and bloody from his encounter with the deity-bashing young men. As his supervisor, I was supposed to care. Sykes, Markham and Peterson came along for the ride and, as Sykes said, to see if his compost was mentis.

Leaving Leon in the probably capable hands of Dr Stone, we wandered into the men's ward.

Bashford was sitting up in bed, propped against his pillows, looking interestingly pale and with a massive bruise on one cheekbone. He had a split lip and both hands were cut and swollen, so he and his trusty sidekick had obviously given a good account of them-selves.

Angus, from whom he had tearfully refused to be parted, was sitting happily on his lap, crooning gently. They gazed adoringly at each other.

Have I remembered to say that Angus is a chicken?

It says much for St Mary's that we'd apparently had a chicken roaming the corridors since Tuesday and, apart from Calvin Cutter, no one appeared to have noticed. Nurse Hunter was giving him vigorously to understand that keeping a chicken on his wardrobe – no, actually keeping a chicken *anywhere* in a medical facility – was unacceptable.

'I have to,' he said, tragically. 'If Dr Bairstow finds out...'

'You surely don't intend to keep him,' I said.

'Her,' he said, tickling the back of her neck. She closed her eyes in bliss.

'You can't keep her. We're not allowed pets.'

'I don't see why not. When you think of the amount of wildlife Markham has harboured over the years ... fleas, lice, fungus, tapeworms, every type of bacteria known to man...'

‘And probably still is,’ said Hunter nastily, obviously not in a good mood and having a go at everyone in sight.

‘Not voluntarily,’ he said to her. ‘Trust me, no one *chooses* to have ringworm.’

‘It’s the fact that ringworm so frequently chooses you that is the point of my argument.’

‘How can you be maundering on about ringworm when there’s a bloody great chicken in the room?’ he said, indignant over yet another of the world’s injustices.

She pointed at her patient, still obliviously chatting to his chicken. ‘It was Bashford who brought the subject up.’

‘I can’t believe you’re siding with a man who has a chicken on his lap.’

‘After you, anything looks good.’

Peterson caught my eye and grinned.

‘Where would you keep her?’ I asked, feeling someone should address the practicalities.

He’d obviously thought it through. ‘She likes wardrobes. She can live in mine during the day and sleep on it at night.’

‘No, she bloody can’t,’ said Sykes with a certain amount of menace. ‘At least not unless you want to be up there with her.’

I suspected he hadn’t thought it through quite enough.

It seemed there was going to be a certain amount of blood up the walls and I was just marshalling my conflict-resolution skills when we heard a murmur of voices on the other side of the door. The door handle rattled dramatically. The traditional St Mary’s sign that Dr Bairstow was here and we were all doomed.

Bashford scooped up Angus and shoved her under the bedcovers where, surprised but willing, she stamped around, making herself comfortable, and apparently perfectly at home in her new surroundings.

We all turned to face the door.

After all these years, Dr Bairstow must surely be accustomed to the guilty silence that falls whenever he enters a room. I think he quite likes it. It shows he’s doing his job properly.

We stood grouped around the bed, a tableau of caring supervisors and colleagues come to visit the sick. Nothing to find fault with there.

The bedclothes bulged unfortunately as Angus settled herself more comfortably and, having arranged things to her satisfaction, uttered a long, low chicken noise of contentment.

I found I couldn’t look.

Bashford, caught between either admitting to the world’s most massive groin malfunction, or explaining why he had a chicken in his bed, closed his eyes and pretended he was dead. Which was probably

only anticipating events by a few minutes.

Dr Bairstow – who was, I suspected, perfectly aware of the existence of Angus in his unit, as indeed, he was aware of everything that happened at St Mary's, and had only stopped in for a little light entertainment at the expense of his staff – stood like the proverbial pillar of salt.

I made sure I stood behind Sykes, who just for once in her life could be useful. Hunter suddenly began to bash away at her scratchpad, Markham was busily tucking into Bashford's grapes, and Peterson was staring thoughtfully out of the window, to all appearances mulling over some tricky temporal conundrum.

'Good morning, Mr Bashford.'

The silence went on until Bashford, realising he'd been abandoned in his hour of need, seized the bedclothes and prepared, somewhat painfully, to get out of bed and, possibly, to flee the country.

The point of Dr Bairstow's stick pushed him firmly back against his pillows. 'I think I speak for all of us, Mr Bashford, when I say we would be grateful if you could remain exactly where you are.'

'But, sir...'

I had to get out. Now.

At the same time, Markham said plaintively that his arm hurt.

'I'd better take a look at that,' said Hunter instantly, pushing him towards the door.

'I have to...' I said, and stopped, suffering a complete inspiration failure.

'... write my...' said Sykes.

'... report...' I finished, and we all bolted for the door, headed by Peterson, showcasing senior management's usual loyalty and commitment in a crisis.

Outside, Dr Stone, still talking to Leon, looked up, astonished, as we burst through, closing the door thankfully on whatever was about to happen to Bashford.

'What on earth is the matter? Is it Bashford?' He began to move towards the door.

Hunter took a deep breath, but before any of us could reply, the door opened and Dr Bairstow limped into the reception area with Angus clamped firmly under one arm. Apparently thrilled with this new and enhanced view of the world, she was looking around with bright-eyed interest. In many ways, she reminded me of Sykes.

He limped past us murmuring, 'Good morning.'

We chorused, 'Good morning, Dr Bairstow,' like infant schoolchildren. He called up the lift, the doors opened, and he stepped inside, Angus bobbing her head happily at this unexpected treat.

The doors closed. They disappeared. It had taken him approximately eight point seven seconds to resolve the Angus crisis. Although to what end...

'You don't think he's going to eat her, do you?' said Hunter anxiously.

'No,' we said, unconvincingly.

'Dammit,' said Sykes, in despair. 'Bashford's only conscious for an hour or so each day and now I have to share him with a bloody chicken.'

'Cheer up,' said Leon, who was trying not to laugh. 'It could be worse.'

'How?'

'He might be conscious all day.'

She brightened. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

Anyway, to cut a long story short, rather to everyone's surprise, and probably as a reward for saving Bashford from serious injury, Angus was allowed to remain at St Mary's. I believe Dr Bairstow made several cruel remarks about raising the level of intelligence in the History Department. She spends her days hanging around the stables and her nights on top of Bashford's wardrobe where she utters a series of crooning noises in his direction before settling down contentedly.

As far as I know, the two of them are very happy, although Sykes wouldn't speak to him for a week and Housekeeping refuse to go anywhere near his room.

I bundled up everyone's reports, and signed and initialled all the paperwork. I was expecting all sorts of grief over – well, everything, really. Calvin Cutter, the manuscript, Bashford, Angus, exploding rocks – it was all a bit of a perfect storm. Anyway, at his command, I presented myself to Dr Bairstow that morning. Mrs Partridge waved me through. I searched her face for some clue as to his mood, but she was wearing her usual expression. The one that gives me to understand I rank somewhere beneath blue-green algae in the great scheme of things.

'Please do not delay him this morning, Dr Maxwell. A deputation from the Parish Council will be arriving at eleven o'clock.'

Oh God – the rural mafia were on their way.

I took a deep breath and entered. 'Good morning, Dr Bairstow.'

He was staring out of his window. 'Good morning, Dr Maxwell. An update, please.'

'All the fires were easily extinguished, sir. The car park has been cleared of debris and shrapnel. Everyone's cars have been returned unharmed. The building sustained two broken windows but Mr

Strong reports no structural damage. Dr Stone reports no major injuries, although Dr Dowson did sprain his wrist when Professor Rapson fell off his stepladder.'

'Clarify.'

'He fell on him, sir.'

I paused in case he had something to say about that, but no. I carried on. 'The horses have returned to the paddock. Mr Markham has received medical treatment for minor Turk-related injuries.'

'Serious?'

'Just a nip, sir.'

'I meant for the horse.'

'Oh, no sir, I believe Mr Strong has some sort of antiseptic equine mouthwash for these occasions. Both Markham and Turk are expected to make a full recovery. In other news, sir, Mr Dieter reports the repairs to Hawking are complete and everything is ready for our next assignment next Monday. And um...' I paused and braced myself.

'Yes, Dr Maxwell?'

'I'm very sorry, sir, I don't know how it happened but, somehow, in all the confusion, Mr Cutter appears to have walked off with Mr Sands' manuscript.'

He continued to stare out of the window. 'Ah well, no great harm done.'

I blinked. 'But sir, he was talking about making a movie or a holo. About time travel. Based on Mr Sands' story.'

'Yes, I believe he was.'

'But won't it be even worse if they make a movie out of it than if he publishes the book?'

'Of course not, Dr Maxwell. When have you ever known a movie to bear even a passing resemblance to the book from which it is adapted? Once the entertainment industry gets its hands on it, the original work will be completely unrecognisable, trust me.'

'Oh.'

'And given their normal rate of progress, it could be years before it even goes into production. With luck, we will all be dead by then.'

'I shall keep my fingers crossed for an early demise, sir.'

'I have no doubt that you will be successful, Dr Maxwell. Thank you, that will be all.'

I turned to go and then had a sudden thought. 'Oh, by the way, sir, did Mr Cutter sign the contracts?'

'What? Oh, yes, I believe so.'

He believed so? He *believed* so?

'I thought it was a matter of financial life and death, sir.'

'Oh no. The cost of repairing Hawking is so astronomical that even

the national debt pales into insignificance in comparison. Nothing we could do would even dent it.'

'But you said this was important, sir.'

'And so it was.'

He turned around, his back to the window, face unreadable.

'But not as important or as welcome as the sight of you and Dr Peterson laughing together again. Thank you, Dr Maxwell, that will be all.'

THE END

the chronicles of st mary's

Just One Damned Thing After Another

A Symphony of Echoes

A second Chance

A Trail Through Time

No Time Like the Past

What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

Lies, Damned Lies, And History

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